

OPINION

The Times-Union

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OUR VIEW

JEA: Don't let emotions take over

The civic conversation over a potential sale of JEA is off to a bad start.

A strained relationship between Mayor Lenny Curry and City Council President Anna Lopez Brosche hasn't helped.

And JEA employee unions have taken the lead in being vocal opponents of change before a thorough evaluation has even begun.

JEA employees have packed City Council chambers wearing red shirts, carrying signs like "JEA is Not for Sale" and speaking out during public comment periods.

It's the right time for Curry to speak up and make his position known. While he has repeatedly said he is only advocating a thorough study of the issue, his silence has led some readers to believe he is actively working behind the scenes for a sale.

So it's good news that Curry plans to meet with the Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

Curry needs to make a few points clear.

First, he needs to assure the workers that he would not support a sale unless their jobs are protected. Union representatives told the Times-Union last week that their opposition is deeper than that.

Second, he needs to assure the general public that he would not necessarily support the highest bid but one that best fits the city's needs.

Any sale ought to be thoroughly explored for all of its pros and cons.

It's understandable that many people in Jacksonville have an emotional tie to JEA. It has been a staple of local government in some form since the late 1800s.

And it has been a major financial contributor to city finances, sometimes to the detriment of the utility itself.

In its eagerness to hold down rates, JEA in the past skimped on maintaining its power plants or entered into too much debt. JEA is still paying down debt. And JEA has a billion-dollar bill looming over a power purchase deal of a nuclear power plant.

The question that will need to be asked during research into selling JEA is a simple one: Is the current \$116 million annual contribution from JEA to city finances guaranteed in the future?

Or will stagnant energy usage, fueled by increasing energy efficiency, put pressure on that contribution? This is a national trend, one reason utilities are merging.

Would proceeds from a sale produce a more reliable stream of revenue for the citizens than staying with the status quo?

The status quo hasn't been so great on two major fronts. It's nearly 50 years since consolidation, and still about half of JEA's customers are susceptible to power outages from overhead lines.

And it's been about 20 years since JEA took over the city's water and sewer utility, yet much of the old core city has septic tanks, many of them failing and polluting our streams.

Revenues from a potential sale could make a big dent in placing power lines underground and extending water and sewer service.

Concerns that JEA's rates would rise under private ownership could be eliminated with terms of a sale. A rate freeze could be part of a sale negotiation.

At the moment, the rates of Florida Power & Light, for instance, are lower than JEA's.

If it ain't broke, don't fix it, the saying goes. But these days the digital revolution is doing the breaking, forcing rapid changes across just about every business.

A larger utility with more resources may be best situated to deal with future disruptions in the energy industry.

JEA is not broken, which is another reason why it is a prime purchase candidate.

An appreciation of the past, however, is no guarantee of future performance.

Look at the businesses today that used to have near-monopoly status and are now undergoing rapid change.

Newspapers come to mind, of course, but how about cable TV as millions of Americans cut the cord?

Almost 50 years ago, the people of Jacksonville chose progress over the status quo, which led to the accurate motto "Bold New City of the South."

This generation has a chance to look boldly at the future as well.

We should not let nostalgia from the past prevent us from acting boldly and prudently for the future.

It's time to take a hard look at a sale, list the pros and cons and determine what would be best for the people of Jacksonville.

ANOTHER VIEW

YOU'LL
SHOOT YOUR
EYE OUT!



ANOTHER VIEW

Florida lawmakers can reduce distracted driving

Nowadays there are more things that are distracting drivers on the roadways — and ultimately putting Florida drivers and families at risk.

At one point or another, we've all been distracted behind the wheel.

Preliminary 2017 data from the National Safety Council shows motor vehicle deaths surpassed 40,000 for the second consecutive year. The council's estimates show 40,100 people died in motor vehicle crashes in 2017, and 4.57 million people were seriously injured.

Florida is one of many states experiencing double-digit spikes in distracted driving-related crashes.

According to the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles, there were more than 45,700

distracted driving crashes in Florida in 2015; they resulted in more than 39,000 injuries and 200-plus fatalities.

These numbers will continue to climb as distracted drivers travel on increasingly congested and aging roads.

Nine out of 10 Floridians live in urban areas, and traffic congestion is getting worse in the state — particularly in large metropolitan areas like Jacksonville.

Too often, making a quick call, texting, adjusting the navigation system or turning our attention to kids and pets in the back seat can result in a short lapse of focus that can lead to a crash.

These kinds of distractions for drivers will likely increase as we approach spring break and the summer months.

During the last days of the Florida Legislature's session,

lawmakers have the chance to change Florida law to make texting while driving a primary offense — and bring Florida in line with 47 other states.

This is an important step for keeping our roads safe and reducing insurance costs for Floridians.

While automobile safety technology is saving lives, now is the time to institute the behavioral and policy changes needed to prevent hand-held technology from putting us in more danger.

In the meantime, Florida drivers must do their part to keep Florida families safe.

Put down the phone!

Logan McFaddin, Tallahassee

McFaddin is regional manager for the Property Casualty Insurers Association of Florida.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

There's a reason why toll roads disappeared

Jacksonville used to have toll roads. We were glad to get rid of them.

Why?

The constant, stifling air pollution caused by long lines of idling cars waiting to get through tolls.

We had less cars then. Can you imagine what it would be like now?

And especially on hot summer days?

Look at the past to determine what is best for the future.

Phyllis Garfield, Jacksonville

Arming school teachers defies common sense

The idea of teachers with concealed weapon permits having the ability to stop a determined shooter with a modern assault rifle is ridiculous.

It is not about training. It is about the effectiveness of the weapons involved.

Handguns have a limited range in terms of accuracy.

The AK-47 and the AR-15, meanwhile, are designed to be very effective weapons of war — and they are exactly that.

Their awesome power, great accuracy, exceptional range, rapid rate of fire and high capacity magazines are well known.

A concealed weapon — or for that matter, a full-size,

open-carry handgun — has single-point handling.

It cannot come close to matching an assault rifle in firing at a target with speed and accuracy.

In my opinion, the advantage in a "teacher vs. bad-guy shooter" scenario goes to the bad guy — and by a margin greater than 10 to 1.

President Donald Trump, come up with a better idea.

This one lacks common sense.

Glenn Smith, Jacksonville

Double standard on security clearance

There must be a double standard when it comes to security clearance.

When former Secretary of State (and Democrat) Hillary Clinton used a private email to connect with her people in the State Department, she drew cries of "Lock her up!" from Republicans who suggested her actions were a security risk.

In fact, we still hear Republicans chanting that.

But during the current administration of Republican President Donald Trump, we've seen Jared Kushner enjoy access to daily presidential briefings on the most sensitive security matters — and for no apparent reason other than being Trump's favored son-in-law.

We've seen a staff secretary who lacked high security clearance — Rob

Porter — have access to every piece of paper put in front of Trump until he resigned because of domestic violence allegations.

And there are reportedly 30 to 40 others who lack high security clearance yet work in the White House staff.

Why is no one screaming, "Lock them up?"

It must be a double standard.

Or is it that the House, the Senate and the Executive Office are all held by Republicans?

Terri Quint, Ponte Vedra

Rummell's threat is a totally empty one

So Peter Rummell and Al Hoffman, Jr. are threatening to withhold campaign donations unless "real reform" is accomplished on gun laws.

Frankly, conservative candidates who understand the true meaning of the Second Amendment should respond by saying, "Who cares?"

They will find funding elsewhere.

Keep in mind that Rummell is the man who brought us Mayor Alvin Brown, the disbanded One Spark street party and the recent bait and switch with The District and JEA.

Now, much like Preston Haskell, Rummell is increasingly acting like a 1 percent limousine liberal.

Steve Holder, Jacksonville

A VERSE FOR TODAY

Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law.

Romans 13:8

LETTERS POLICY

Letters of about 200 words are preferred. All letters are edited for space, clarity and newspaper style. Include a name, address, phone number and occupation. **Email:** letters@jacksonville.com. **Mail:** Letters from Readers, The Florida Times-Union, P.O. Box 1949, Jacksonville, FL 32231.